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ABSTRACT

Studies of the use of ethnography as an evaluation tool in large-scale contract research studies were reviewed before data collection and design decisions were finalized in response to a Request for Proposal (RFP). Five tasks had to be accomplished before data collection could begin: study sites were selected, a system for data collection was devised, organizational and data-retrieval methods were designed, preliminary study questions were developed and expanded from the RFP, and field data collectors were trained. In the final selection process, eight sites were selected and evaluated on the following criteria: (1) past history of involvement in other similar projects; (2) understanding of the mandate of the federal program; (3) management plan for the project; (4) geographic location; and (5) overall quality of the funded proposal and likelihood of its success. All eight projects had well-developed statements on multicultural education, collaboration and field-based teacher education, and strong management plans. Data were collected from informal interviews, unstructured observations, written materials produced by the project, miscellaneous contextual information such as newspaper clippings of events influencing projects and attendance at various meetings in the projects. This methodology was compared to that of other ethnographic case studies. (RL)

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ETHNOGRAPHY AND CASE STUDY METHODOLOGY: AN APPROACH TO LARGE-SCALE POLICY STUDIES OF FEDERAL PROGRAMS

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ETHNOGRAPHY AND CASE STUDY METHODOLOGY:
AN APPROACH TO LARGE-SCALE POLICY STUDIES OF FEDERAL PROGRAMS*

Case studies have always been a useful device for studying and analyzing an unidimensional phenomenon. This type of case study mode draws its impetus from the psychoclinical model and is, for the most part, one-person oriented and behavioristic rather than field-oriented and structural. Even though social scientists began to modify case study methodology more toward field settings and structural elements of a study topic, we were warned by methodologists that generalizations from an "n of one" was dangerous. However, with the advent of large, national, multisite studies of federal programs of the '60s, the need for more explanatory factors became apparent. These studies may have uncovered statistical relationships and measured outcomes, but the data were often severely limited in capturing how the change occurred or why no changes occurred. These early studies failed to capture the local conditions under which federal programs were being implemented and carried out. This limitation often resulted in ill-conceived program policy, which sometimes contributed to the politicalization of these programs. Documentation of the structural elements and the field settings of federal program interventions is still needed in many of today's evaluation studies of federal programs. Case studies are a partial response to this need.

Case Studies, Ethnography, and Program Policy

The request for proposal (RFP) that gave incentive for the methodology described here required an in-depth study of how a large federal program was

planning and implementing two important elements of its rules and regulations. There were 80 funded projects throughout the United States. Although the RFP did not specify the methodology, it did specify the questions to which the study was to be addressed and the time frame of the study. Our selection strategies were immediately drawn to case studies because the underlying theme of the study questions was field-oriented, and specified several "hows and whys" about implementaton and intervention for organizational change in communities, universities, and local school districts. Because of the past history of the program that was to be evaluated, we knew these changes depended most heavily on the persons selected to implement and participate in the program. Thus, the study had to be directed toward the persons actively involved in implementing the programs.

Because of these requirements we decided that a case study methodology was most appropriate, we were faced with the limitations of previous attempts at cross-site case studies, that is:

- The difficulty of recording the local conditions under which organizational change occurs.
- The challenges of documenting the participant's view of the intervention process.
- The exhorbitant cost of multiple-site case studies.
- The reduction of large volumes of data to answer programmatic or policy questions.
- The difficulty of developing enough controls and validity to produce policy statements.

In spite of these limitations, we also knew ethnography held a partial answer because the basic intent of ethnographers is to see the world through the eyes of their informants. Another basis for our choice of ethnographic methods is that ethnography seems to be superior to other research methods in documentating the complex context surrounding the program implementation

process. In other words, ethnography is sensitive to both context and process.

However, because ethnography is relatively new as an evaluation tool, especially in large-scale contract reserach studies, we sought past studies of this kind before making our final decisins regarding data collection and design. Previous studies of this kind, e.g., the Abt Study of Experimental Schools (Herriot and Gross, 1979); the NIE-funded studies of desegregated schools (Cassell, 1978); school violence and vandalism (Deslonde, 1978), and the Far West Laboratory's beginning teacher evaluation study (Tikunoff, Berlinger, and Rist, 1975) raised several questions regarding the applicability of ethnographic methods to this kind of research. The problems those studies encountered included:

- The prohibitive expense of supporting professionals in the field for expanded lengths of time.
- Difficulty in reducing large volumes of field notes into workable policy formats.
- Logistical difficulties in engaging researchers in the field while keeping them abreast of the evaluation as a whole.
- Ethical problems of confidentiality.
- Conflicting local program goals and evaluation goals.
- Difficulty in merging qualitative and quantitative components of the evaluation.

Some of these studies, in an effort at adhering to the strictness of the ethnographic approach, rarely formed hypotheses, structured study questions, or identified rudimentary policy issues before going into the field. Because of the contractual nature of this study, however, we could not avoid this aspect of the study approach; in addition, we wanted a design that would offer controls so that policy could emerge from the data.

Case Study Approach and Design

In an attempt to meet all five criteria of good ethnography, we made several modifications demanded by the contract research approach:

- Hypotheses were rudimentary when data collection began and were to be changed and adapted as data collections became more acclimated to the project.

- The research instruments were field-based: the data collectors themselves acted as the instruments.

- Data were collected on sites for 1 year.

- Relying on a broad definition of culture, the researchers sought to understand how participants made sense of the projects and their role in the projects.

- The study was holistic in the sense that it attempted to capture all aspects of the projects and to see how the context of the projects influenced the program components being implemented.

Study Design

Five tasks had to be accomplished before data collection could begin: study sites were selected, a system for data collection was devised, organizational and data-retrieval methods were designed, preliminary study questions were developed and expanded from the RFP, and field data collectors were trained.

Selection of Study Sites

The study sample of four sites was drawn from the pool of 82 1978-funded projects. The 82 sites were grouped according to four criteria:

- An urban site.
- A rural site.
- A bilingual site.
- A multicultural site (LEA schools with populations of three or more ethnic groups).
- These sites were then evaluated* on the:
  - Past history of involvement in other similar projects.
  - Understanding of the mandate of the federal program.
  - Management plan for the project.
  - Geographic location (limited to the continental United States).
  - Overall quality of the funded proposal and likelihood of its success.

Twenty sites were selected as potential study sites. They were visited by SRI staff members to determine the fit between the proposal and the actual project, travel logistics, and the project's willingness to be included in the study.

In the final selection process, eight sites that fulfilled these criteria were selected. Of the eight sites, two were urban, two rural, two bilingual, and two multicultural. All eight projects had well-developed statements on multicultural education, collaboration and field-based teacher education, and strong management plans--which the RFP requested us to

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* Our only source of information for these characteristics were the written, funded proposlas of the 80 projects.

study. The sites differed in geographical location and amount of previous experience with past programs. Four sites were chosen as primary data collection sites, and two were visited periodically so that they could function as alternates in case unanticipated disruptive events occurred in the primary sites. The primary sites that were chosen were from diverse geographical areas and therefore most of the major sections of the United States were represented. The project director in each site expressed enthusiasm about being included in the study, and travel to the site did not present logistical problems for the SRI study team.

Data Collection

Data were collected from a number of sources: informal interviews, unstructured observations, written materials produced by the project, miscellaneous contextual information such as newspaper clippings of events influencing projects, and attendance at various meetings in the projects.

All interviews and observations were recorded in detail in writing. Tape recorders were not used. Written field notes were more appropriate than tape recordings because data were collected primarily through informal channels of conversation, unstructured interviews, and observations. Also, we felt that tape recorders often lend an air of formality to social interactions. Notes were recorded in front of respondents whenever possible. When notetaking was impossible (e.g., during meals, informal social events), notes were recreated from memory as soon as possible after the event. These written notes constituted the raw data of the study.

Each evening the data collector recorded the day's events onto a cassette tape. Elaborating on the written notes, the tapes became the primary data source. While recording, the data collector kept a topical index of the location of data on the tapes, using the tape count on the tape recorder.

Data Retrieval and Organization

The topical index simplified data retrieval. The index allowed for quick access to raw data on the tapes and eliminated the necessity and expenseof transcribing the tapes of raw field notes.

Following each visit, data collectors organized the raw field notes into a field report. The field report was a written record of the events, routines, statements, project activities and opinions seen and heard during the site visit. It also contained physical descriptions of the sites and of the participants in the projects. To assure anonymity, the names of sites, schools, and participants were changed in the field reports. The study director read and edited each field report before final typing. The final typed report then became a protocol, later used for final write-up of the case study. These protocols can be seen as mini-case studies of one visit.

Debriefings

Either before or shortly after writing field reports, the case study staff (all field data collectors) met for sessions. These sessions accomplished the following:

- Standardized focus in field report writing
- Refined the original study questions
- Developed hypotheses and identified policy issues

- Provided a general framework for analysis and interpretation of findings
- Gave directions for future inquiry and the next site visit

Following the debriefing session, each data collector wrote an interpretation and analysis of the data recorded in the field reports, these were separate portions from the protocals and was developed as an effort to eliminate judgments and interpretations from the field reprts and to isolate them in the analysis and interpretation section. This analysis section was invaluable for tracking policy issues and for identifying future research questions for all sites.

Each visit was considered complete when the data collector had compiled the following:

- Raw field notes.
- Cassette tape of raw data.
- Topical index of raw data.
- Field report with analysis and interpretation section.
- Written materials collected during the visit.
- Copies of written correspondence with the site and telephone interviews.

When data collection was complete, the study director developed a cross-site data analysis system that identified key topics (e.g., multicultural education, inservice training, community council, policy board) and developed subtopics. A topical card file was set up and data from the field notes were pasted on cards, filed under the key topics, and indexed to subtopics. The topical card file made data from the four sites accessible for final report writing.

Reporting the Findings

Although the volume and expense of data bank was reduced by using the field report and cassette tapes, we were still presented with the problem of describing each site in enough detail that the reader could vicariously experience the same dynamics as the local project participants. The final report contains a separate volume of narrative case studies, which represents the results of this effort. These case studies are arranged by major events, i.e., community council elections, planning groups, workshops, policy board meetings, etc.

While they were writing the narrative case studies, as well as during the debriefings, the staff collectively identified the major cross-site findings that could both generate insights for improving the local effort and provide the basis for policy at the national level. The cross-site analysis was then based on visits to six site studies (four primary and two back-up). Despite the limitations of the case study approach, we still feel that our data and findings are sufficiently comprehensive so that program improvement statements and policy issues can be offered to readers of the report. Although raw data were greatly reduced, our data are rich in contextual detail: the data provide insight for understanding the basic dynamics involved in superimposing a program (geared for reform) upon an organizational structure that is basically resistant to short-range reform efforts.

Conclusions

This methodology differs significantly from other ethnographic case studies in three areas.

. Cost factors were reduced by:

- Periodic visits by ethnographers rather than living on site.
- Raw data filed on tapes rather than transcribed.

- Policy issues and study questions guided the development of written report throughout data collection, thus even further reducing the volume of data.

. Debriefings became an important part of an ongoing analysis that continued throughout data collection phases.

. Analysis and interpretation as part of the debriefing continued through data collection phases.

. Cross-site analysis began as soon as policy issues* and study questions were validated from the field.

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* Further details of policy findings and narrative case studies may be found in Deslonde, James, Teacher Corps: An Implementation Study of Collaboration and Multicultural Education, Volumes I and II, SRI International, Menlo Park, California, August 1980.

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